**Antebellum Slavery: Health**

The ante-bellum period of the old South is often considered the pinnacle of Southern aristocracy. Although the aristocrats owned a majority of the wealth and land, it was their slaves who made the plantations a success.

**The Work:** Slavery became the most absolute involuntary form of human servitude. Their labor services are obtained through force and their physical beings are regarded as the property of others.

\*Most slaves were given tasks to perform according to their physical capability.

\*A work day consisted of 12-14 hours a day, during harvest time and, could go on during harvest and milling for 16-18 hours a day per week, 7 days a week.

\*Their was little sex differentiation in the field work. Women who were well-along in their pregnancies, were still sent to work at plowing and hoeing.

\*"Hard driving" was quite common, and consisted of working slaves past their physical capabilities, as what they regarded as normal.

\*In the South there was no rest season. The climate was always considered good enough to work in and, so, everyone was economically active all year round.

\* Children between the ages of three and six were organized into gangs and put to weeding. Children between the ages of six and ten might be active as water carriers. Children between the ages of ten and twelve were put to work in the fields or collecting and handing out tools.

**Punishment was an inherent part of the slave system. Not only was physical punishment brutal, but mental and sexual abuse were also employed as a means of control.**

**The Punishments:** While each plantation had its own set of social, religious, and labor codes, all had the basic format for an instilled hierarchy in which the slave-master reigned as “god”. He maintained the element of slave misery, by controlling the degree of pain.

\*It was clear to plantation owners that slavery could not survive without the whip (even though owners were forbidden to deliberately kill or maliciously mutilate a slave). Males and females were whipped indiscriminately. The severity of whipping depended on the number of strokes to the type of whip. Fifteen to twenty lashes were generally sufficient, but they could range much higher. Some slaves received one lash for each year of their life.

\*Treatments were given such as mutilation, branding, whipping, beating, drowning, and hanging which were supposedly regulated or prohibited by law.

\* Other items used for punishments included stocks, chains, collars, and irons.

\*Women were constantly under threat of sexual exploitation. If a female slave refused the advances of her master, she could be raped. Women could be raped by the owner of the plantation, his sons or, any white male with no threat of public retribution.

**The slave standard of living started with a poor, and often, inadequate diet.**

**The Food:** The food was generally adequate in bulk, but imbalanced and monotonous.

\*Typical food allowance was a peck of corn meal and three to four pounds of salt pork or bacon per week per person. This diet could be supplemented by vegetables from their gardens, by fish or wild game, and molasses (not usually).

\*The slaves prepared their own food and carried it out to the field in buckets.

\*Lack of variety made the slaves susceptible to nutrition related diseases.

**The Clothes:** Slaves were not well-clothed. They had inadequate clothing for people engaged in heavy labor all year.

\*Children would dress in long shirts.

\*Some plantations provided slaves with two shirts, woolen pants, and a jacket in the winter. Along with two shirts and two cotton pants in summer. On other plantations, Women were provided with an insufficient amount of cloth and made the clothes for the slaves.

\*The cloth was cheap material, produced in England ("Negro cloth").

**The Home:** Plantation slaves were housed in slave cabins. Small, rudely built of logs with clapboard sidings, with clay chinking. Floors were packed dirt. They were leaky and drafty and the combination of wet, dirt, and cold made them a breeding ground for disease.

**The Diseases:** The South was a disease prone environment due to the hotter weather and the insects from swamps and marshes. Physicians were in short supply, and medical knowledge poor. There was no concept of bacterial transmission of disease, or insect borne diseases.

Life expectancy for Southerners was lower than Northerners and life expectancy of slaves was lower than whites.

\*Diseases included malaria, Asiatic cholera, dysentery, pneumonia, tuberculosis, tetanus, pellagra, beri beri.

\*Deaths in child birth were common due to heavy excess labor.

**The only thing that eased the pains of slavery was that they were allowed to have families and that they could buy their freedom, which was not likely, but it gave them hope.**

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